

CHILD ABUSE LINE

28 February 2008

The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD: A constituent who works as a police officer in South Australia recently contacted my office very concerned about the situation that South Australia Police are regularly confronted with when they are called to homes and, in the opinion of the police, the removal of a child is required. The officer, who asked me not to give his name, gave an example of where SAPOL officers were tasked to a house and found a small child in absolute total neglect at the house, and apparently the child was seen by the officer eating dog faeces. The officers obviously did what they could to protect the child immediately, but under the current powers available to them they could not remove the child from the house and had to wait outside whilst they called the child abuse report line, leaving the child inside during that time.

I am told that it is SAPOL policy to only use its powers to remove a child pursuant to section 16 of the Children's Protection Act in extreme cases, such as a hostage or siege situation, otherwise they are required to defer to Families SA's judgment on the matter. However, in this situation SAPOL officers called the child abuse report line, using the police priority number, and could not get someone on that line for over an hour. The same officer explained that, when SAPOL officers routinely call the report line on their priority number, specifically for police, the minimum wait is at least 20 minutes, with the average waiting time about one hour and sometimes as bad as an hour and a half.

The officer says that, once they get through, the process takes only a couple of minutes, yet they have to wait so long to get through to that number. Of course, officers are then delayed from performing other police work while they are on hold, waiting for Families SA to answer the line.

My questions are:

1. Does the minister agree that the current situation is untenable and requires immediate decisive action?
2. What will the minister do to ensure that such situations cannot ever recur?
3. Will the minister intervene to cut through this ridiculous red tape and allow police to intervene in order to protect children in such deplorable situations?

The Hon. P. HOLLOWAY (Minister for Police, Minister for Mineral Resources Development, Minister for Urban Development and Planning):

As the honourable member suggests in his questions, the police do have powers to intervene. However, I would have thought it very prudent for our police officers to use the experts in this area, in the Department for Families and Communities, before decisions are made.

While the police must have emergency powers, and obviously there will be some cases that will be extreme where the police may exercise those powers, in other cases surely it is appropriate that the experts in that area should be involved in making those decisions. I am sure that most police officers would be the first to suggest that they are not experts in that area.

The questions asked by the honourable member are serious. Unfortunately, we are living in a time, not just in this state but also right around the country, when, for a number of social reasons, there appears to be an increase in child abuse. Clearly, it is putting strain on those government agencies that have to deal with this problem.

I will refer the questions to the Police Commissioner and to my colleague the Minister for Families and Communities. I will seek their view on whether or not there is some crisis in this area and more needs to be done, or whether this is an isolated case of delay being experienced. I will obtain that information. I will also

ask the Commissioner and my colleague to consider whether it is appropriate for improvements to be made in the system.